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THE GOTHIC IN THE CATHEDRALS AND CHURCHES OF FRANCE.

BY AUGUSTE RODIN.

I.

ONE of the first among foreigners to understand the ancient cathedrals and churches of France was Ruskin, as was Victor Hugo among his fellow-countrymen. Hugo had made no special study of the subject; but he understood through his great genius: he understood as a poet; for cathedrals are vast poems.

At the time he wrote, the Gothic art was considered in France as something barbarian; in fact, the epithet was applied to all that was Gothic. This error antedates the eighteenth century. Even in the reign of Louis XIV., Fénelon, and those with him who speak of the Gothic architecture, referred to it in disparaging language. What was more admired in the age of the great Louis and his successor was a town-hall of the style then modern. Many cathedrals and churches were roughly treated during those years, and the French Revolution did no more than carry on the work of destruction already begun.

If some one in authority begins to say that a thing is ugly, nearly everybody follows his example; and it needs a strong intelligence to uphold the contrary. Victor Hugo related to me that, when the Rue de Rivoli was being cut, that part of it which is beyond the arcades, between the Louvre and the Rue Saint-Antoine, had been originally designed to have another course, commencing opposite the colonnade of the Louvre and running from there in a straight line as far as the Place du Trône. Had this plan been carried out, the Tour Saint-Jacques, a fine specimen of Gothic sculpture, would have been demolished. Victor Hugo protested with such good effect that the original plan was modified, and the Tower was preserved.

I cannot say that, as a boy, though born in Paris, I paid much attention to the architecture of Notre Dame. Children do not know how to see. I remarked its great size, and that was all. Only when I was in full possession of myself, at the age of about twenty-five, did I begin to make a special study of its beauty, which was generally decried. To some extent, indeed, before I was twenty, my eyes had been opened while I was working for a sculptor named Biès, who had a good deal to do with the so-called "restoring" of Notre Dame. It was to him that Viollet-le-Duc once said: "Forget all you know, and you will execute something Gothic." The expression had its hidden meaning. Profound knowledge is needed to produce the real Gothic—a form which to-day exists only in the monuments of the past.

As I grew older and rid myself of the prejudices of my environment, I acquired more assurance and dared to see for myself. Whenever I travelled, I made it a rule to visit all the cathedrals I could. Even in a small town there is often a real cathedral. I used to awake early in the morning, and hasten to visit what for me were the chief objects of interest. And I remember that the spires and the various parts of these churches gave me an exquisite joy. I would linger and walk round them until I was thoroughly tired out.

II.

No architect or sculptor has ever been able properly to restore a Gothic church or cathedral. Those who have tried, essayed a task as vain as if one were to attempt completing a chapter of Rabelais in which a part was wanting. The new portion would not be like the old. Formerly, when Greek or Roman statues were discovered, the custom was to restore them. To-day, the custom has fallen into desuetude, and nothing is lost by it. The Italians, it is true, continue to repair their ancient monuments; but they only touch the parts that are falling to ruin; whereas, when we repair, we insist on restoring, and spoil the old in order to harmonize it with the new. In Italy, the old is still extant; and, notwithstanding the repairing, we are able to enjoy the admirable beauty of the whole.

III.

It is difficult to explain the Gothic; there is always something that escapes definition. Consequently, ordinary ideas on the subject are erroneous or incomplete. Many people talk of the Gothic

as if it were nothing but the predominance of the ideal over the material, or again of the idea over form. I consider the matter rather from the point of view of the execution. Another opinion is that the ogive constitutes the Gothic. This is also inexact. We might have Gothic architecture without the ogive. This style results from a long and careful experimentation on the effects of light and shade, and from the faculty thus acquired of giving to architecture a living, moving appearance. When I speak of light and shade, it is without reference to painting; I mean the rendering visible and perceptible certain geometrical points that make the planes of sculpture.

In order to have such effects of light and shade, there must be strongly projecting surfaces, arranged with due regard to their position in foreground and background. These were achieved with infinite art in the old Gothic cathedrals and churches, whose every part invariably stands out or recedes with a fine chiaroscuro. In the modern Gothic, however good the general design may be in outline, there is a lack of location in foreground and background, and the reliefs are shallow, holding no shadow, so that the details seem poor and cold. The superiority of the old will be at once apparent, if an ancient church porch is examined. It looks like a grotto or a cavern—architecturally constructed, of course. Certain of the figures that have been carved within it are bathed in light, others are shrouded in darkness, and others again show half-tints of chiaroscuro. Throughout the day, there is a continual change. While there are never more than a few figures in full view at the same instant, and the rest are either partially seen or divined, the sun's procession transports the effects from one side to the other, transposing them gradually between morning and evening in an animated panorama. Inside the edifice, there is the same impression of light playing amid deep recesses, but here we have candles replacing the sun's rays. Much more than the ogive, the grotto, the cavern, is essential to the Gothic, since by its aid is obtained a unique trituration of light, which comes back to the eyes with mysterious softness after penetrating into the abyss. Not that the architects of the Middle Ages necessarily wrought with a desire to produce something mysterious. This, like the other effects, was derived from the manner of their working, a manner present architectural sculpture is ignorant of or ignores. There is plenty of relief in

the modern style, but the relief has no life. Whether the buildings be church, chapel or synagogue, they are ugly and cold to look at.

IV.

The good Gothic style appears in churches and cathedrals built during the four or five hundred years that lie between the eleventh and sixteenth centuries. Indeed, it can hardly be said to terminate with the Renaissance; for our Renaissance is still a Gothic style, which we wrongly call Renaissance, and is, in reality, a marriage of the Gothic with the Greek—virtually, all is Gothic, but the details are finished in the Greek manner. Nearly all Renaissance churches are good examples of this mingling of the two styles. In Paris, for instance, there are Saint-Eustache and Saint-Etienne du Mont. The latter, which is both fine and beautiful, is a Renaissance of Henry the Fourth's period. Tonnerre also possesses two Renaissance churches, one of which has been restored and spoilt, while the other remains as it was first designed. Under the Revolution it was damaged; but the plan is, nevertheless, intact.

Among the purely Gothic edifices it is difficult to assign a preference, except on the score of some particularity. And they are full of such. No two are alike. At Chartres, the cathedral has two spires; one of them soars straight up without mouldings; the other is ornamented; and the contrast is a piece of admirable artistic effect.

In fact, art exists only by oppositions, Gothic art especially. That is to say, if you have something ornamental, you must have beside it, as a foil, something simple. In Gothic churches, this is always the case. Notice the towers; in the lower portions, they are huge masses of stone, whereas, above, they flower like plants. If Notre Dame at Paris is looked at sideways from the proper standpoints, this can be easily verified. In the environs of Paris, there are numbers of old churches that illustrate the Gothic, the Abbey of Saint-Denis for one. It has been restored; but the grand outlines have not been touched; and, at the distance permitting them to be appreciated, they stand out splendidly. The whole structure is like a child's drawing, a simple yet beautiful drawing of the kind some children know how to make. It is a house with a steeple at the side. At Pontoise, the church has some exquisite details. In the midst of the portal, there is a

small edicule of the Greek Renaissance order; it is charming. At Etampes, Dreux, Evreux, Caen, there are edifices equally remarkable. The finest church at Caen has been restored. It was Renaissance Gothic. Now it is heavy. The churches at Troyes were superb; but, since their restoration, the beauty has disappeared. At Sens, there is an exceedingly fine specimen of the Gothic. At Nevers, too, the churches are remarkable.

Our French cathedrals are superior to the English and German ones by the greater sculptural expression displayed in them. In this respect, they are second to nothing outside antique Greek architecture. The German Gothic is characteristically hard. The cathedrals at Strasburg and Cologne exhibit this defect, but, like that at Milan, more on the exterior than in the interior. The interior of the Cologne edifice is very fine, and yet the structure as a whole does not possess that supreme art for lack of which the largest cathedral appears smaller than a small church which has it. Antwerp cathedral is very beautiful, more beautiful than Cologne. Its spire is a veritable crown; soaring, as it does, into the air, it is glorious to behold. At Malines, the church is likewise beautiful; its ornamentation, however, is somewhat poor, the depth of its relief not being sufficient.

One vantage-point from which to behold a Gothic cathedral is, at a distance from it—two or three kilometres from the town. At this distance it seems enormous, magnificent, imposing; all the other buildings of the town shrink into nothingness. The mass of the structure is in straight lines, but so ornamented that the straight line seems to bulge and fill out, which gives to the whole flexibility and richness.

V.

The architects who raised these edifices were endowed with a consummate knowledge of effect. They would appear, indeed, by the works they have left to have been acquainted with every science. It is the greatness of them all, perhaps, which has prevented their names from coming down to posterity. There are, of course, legends about them. Scholars claim to have discovered the identity of some. But, in fact, while handing on to us the purest and best of themselves, they remain anonymous. At most, we may presume that, in the figures they have carved, there are portraits of many designers and workers. It was only at the Renaissance that names began to be attached to the masterpieces of

sculpture. At that time, Philibert Delorme, Jean Goujon, Jean Cousin and others succeeded in perpetuating their fame. At present, if any one travels in France and sees a fine figure carved somewhere—on a tomb, may be—he is told that Jean Goujon or Jean Cousin carved it, simply because nobody knows who carved it; and as the artist's name has perished, it is these later sculptors who get the credit.

VI.

In commencing to study the Gothic, it matters little where the starting-point is. The chief thing is to humble one's self and become a little child, to be content not to master all at once, to be obedient to what Nature can teach, and to be patient through years and years. The study grows easy enough in time. At first, of course, the comprehension is embryonic; you visit one and another edifice; you divine a part of their value, and with each new experience, the comprehension increases. A mind capable of analyzing and coordinating will ultimately succeed in understanding. If to-day there is such a lack in this respect, the cause lies in the neglect of those great qualities of art that are more than originality, and are born from the love which inspires the work.

In one direction the Gothic sculptors surpass the Greek. The Greek temple is the same everywhere, and similarity, identity, is not a culminating quality of art. Life is made up of strength and grace most variously mingled, and the Gothic gives us this. No one church resembles another. Between the churches of one part of France and another, differences exist on a very large scale. The cathedrals of Champagne contrast with those of Burgundy, those of the North still more with those of the West.

To explain why these differences are found is difficult. The race and soil are probably a partial factor. The sky also may have had its influence. The Romanesque style which immediately precedes the Gothic is ordinarily sombre; and yet, if one goes to the banks of the Loire, it will be seen to be as luminous as that of the Renaissance. The sombre note prevails most in the north of France, but it is felt also in the south. This Romanesque is the style of the first kings in the sixth and seventh centuries, and persists to a considerably later period. The mixed Renaissance and Gothic, which at Rouen is rather hard as well as rather dark,

assumes in the Loire Valley an infinite splendor. At Chambord the Castle, which I saw before it was restored, was then a structure of marvellous grace and full of light.

In the natural transformation of the Gothic, whatever changes were made took place under the twofold dominating preoccupation of subordinating every detail to the whole effect, and of giving to each detail a depth of finish that produces softness in the mass. This principle is carried out in the smallest thing as well as in the greatest. The tiniest leaf is perfectly chiselled and has its own importance as well as its proper place in the mass. In the Flamboyant style, for instance,—a development that came about during the sixteenth century,—there is none the less simplicity on account of these qualities. Wherever a cathedral strikes the eye as being cold and hard, there is lack of seriation in the details. They stand out by themselves too much on the same plane; and then, even though the values are equal, they do not contribute what they should to the effect of the whole.

The Gothic style itself is a natural outgrowth of the Roman. It is the Roman raised and magnified. When once adopted, it spread throughout Western Europe, the result being an architectural aggregate, the like of which had never been seen before, and perhaps will never be seen again. And the terrible thing is that our restoring of cathedrals is a quick way of destroying these masterpieces. If the Greeks, or afterwards the Romans, in their decadence, had destroyed the Parthenon, we should have known nothing of the veritable grandeur of its builders. In France, there are a considerable number of Gothic churches which have been left alone, because they were not marked on the list, money not being forthcoming for the work of restoration. One of the churches at Tonnerre is an example; the cathedral at Beauvais is another, and one of the finest. This cathedral has no steeple. At a distance from the town the back of the structure can be seen, looking like a living giant.

It is worth noting that the architects of the Middle Ages did not aim at regularity in their edifices, which are often dissymmetric. Sometimes even, the nave is not in the axis. And yet the entire building is beautiful by the very opposition of its values. The fashion now is to speak slightly of such productions, to apply to them the term "naïve." The word so used indicates inability to grasp the perfection of their execution. A similar affecta-

tion is that which asserts Greek art has no life in it. On the contrary, for those who have eyes to see, Greek art is all life, but so naturally expressed that ordinary intelligence is apt to pass it by unheedingly. In art we are becoming more and more ignorant, in a century, too, which thinks it possesses great critical power.

The material out of which the ancient Gothic cathedrals and churches were built was a stone curiously small-hewn. Its color varies a little in the different provinces of France, but it is largely gray, or grayish-white. Burgundy stone shows rather more gray, Alsace more tendency to red. In Auvergne rows of black stones are mingled with the gray mass, which is a practice also existing in Italy. It is possible that the kind and color of the stone exercised a certain influence upon the construction; but, in general, Gothic architecture does not seek effects of light by mingling varieties of stone. More exactly, one might say that in the Gothic everything is added for the sake of the monument. In fact, we return to the *chiaroscuro* previously mentioned—the sculptural expression being the structural expression.

The real home of the French Gothic is the centre and the north of France. It reigns besides in the east, in Burgundy; and it may claim to take in Belgium and even a little of Holland. The Gothic of the south never advanced far beyond the Romanesque. That of Brittany is a trifle heavy and not so fine. In the direction of Poitiers and Angoulême, the style has mostly remained Romanesque, but of a special and admirable kind. I might, indeed, say that it is more Oriental and almost Byzantine. To tell the truth, the Romanesque, lying as it does between the Roman and the Gothic, frequently has in it something of one or the other; and, in particular, there is a period in which it is difficult to say whether the style is Romanesque or Early Gothic. What is easier is to distinguish between the Greek and the Gothic. Both possess to a superlative degree that peculiar reflection of light and shade, due to the sculptural planes, of which I have spoken above. But in the Greek there is more trituration of the light; in the Gothic, more trituration of the shade; or, again, one might put it, the Greek models light, and the Gothic models shade.

It would require a series of photographs or designs to make these distinctions quite evident. I have them all photographed in my memory, a method which is not very convenient for reproduction. A few notes and drawings are my only graphic

representations; but as I have never learned perspective, my drawings often wobble. This defect in my education often troubles me in my architectural designs, for perspective is a useful science, albeit landscape-painters sometimes neglect it. In sculpture there is less need for it, unless in making bas-reliefs with a distant background. What I know of perspective is by instinct. When I was young, I had an antipathy to geometry, believing it was a cold science that hindered enthusiasm. I have had perforce to acquaint myself with it, since all I do is based on geometry. Life itself is geometrical, a truth I only came to recognize later. The geometry I practise, however, is a geometry of my own,—which is, no doubt, pretty close to the other. I am like the peasant that does not know arithmetic. He reckons in a way peculiar to himself.

VII.

To say what has been my own progress in the study and comprehension of the Gothic would be in detail impossible for me. The study has unquestionably influenced my sculpture, giving me more flexibility, more depth, more life in my modelling. This can be seen in my figures, which have become more mysterious, owing to the more perfect chiaroscuro. Not that I could point in particular to one or another of my productions as an instance of the modification. The influence has entered into my blood, and has grown into my being.

VIII.

The Gothic is not the Gothic because of the period in which it was developed, but because of the manner of seeing of the period. You enter a cathedral. You find it full of the mysterious life of the forest; and the reason of it is that it reproduces that life by artistic compression, so that the rock, the tree—Nature, in fine—is there; an epitome of Nature. It is a mistake to imagine that the religious conceptions of the time were able to bring forth these masterpieces, any more than the religious conceptions of to-day are responsible for the ugliness of our modern structures. The ancient edifices gained their beauty through the faithful study of Nature practised by the Gothic sculptors. Their only ideal was the vision they had of her; quite as much as the Greeks, they drew from her all their power; and, in like manner, I find my inspiration in my model. The charm of the subject comes from that. I am opposed to the doctrine which holds that the

idea leads, that it ennobles the work. I believe rather that it is the strength resulting from labor which adds to the idea. Of itself, our idea is poor. This theory may seem commonplace; but, at any rate, it better explains the hundreds and hundreds of splendidly artistic buildings—churches and abbeys as well as cathedrals—that came into existence during the Gothic period, many of them hidden away in country nooks which need exploring for these treasures to be discovered. Compared with similar Italian edifices they are much superior. In fact, the Gothic in Italy is less developed, too, as regards the number of its buildings. There, painting and sculpture have been more separated from architecture, and exist more for themselves; especially worthy of mention are the painted windows and tapestry. In France, also, there is no lack of beautiful windows and tapestry; and what adds to the value of them is their being really part of the Gothic interior they adorn. Ruskin has written well on these things; I believe it was his book which brought so many English-speaking people to visit them. We have writers of our own to-day, Huysmans among others, who introduce descriptions of them into their literature; but one does not get much benefit by reading them. A visit to the church is more profitable, or, failing this, to a museum like the Trocadero, where plaster reproductions of some fine specimens of Gothic architecture may be seen. The stained-glass windows painted in recent times make little or no impression on us, because the tones are false. Those of the Gothic period raise one to the heavens. They are copied from the flowers of the field, not from imagination; and the men that painted them pored over the tints and shades of the plants and blossoms they had under their eyes, until they had succeeded in reproducing them exactly as they saw them. I insist on this point, for it is Nature that is celestial. They who give us windows now proceed in another way.

In order to reform our present stereotyped methods of art, we want a second Renaissance. For a long time I hoped that in a near future this might be; but I have ceased hoping to-day. It would require a catastrophe capable of overturning and changing everything. Of course, I am speaking of what is likely to happen in the next twenty-five or fifty years. Life is eternal; and, sooner or later, things must alter for the better. But so far, in our modern architecture, I see nothing that gives encouragement.

We have intelligent men who are sufficiently educated. They copy everything; they ferret out the style of Nineveh, as well as the styles of Louis XIV and Louis XV; but what they produce is without soul, without art, and is insignificant. They repeat, but only as the parrot does. For long years, we have done nothing but turn out from our colleges young men stuffed with useless scientific lumber; and they very quickly lose it all, and there is nothing to take its place. This is not to be wondered at when throughout Europe there is such a neglect of art in our education. It may be replied to me that the inventions of science compensate for the deficiency; but these inventions are almost exclusively, if not quite, a mere increase in the power of the bodily senses and faculties; the telegraph in that of the tongue, the telephone in that of the ear, the railway in that of the legs, the photographic science in that of the eye; and these inventions leave in ignorance the more intellectual part of the individual. Your portrait can be taken, your voice boxed up; this is extraordinary; but the soul which commands, the god which is in the head, is forgotten.

And yet the means for altering this state of things is near at hand, is beneath our eyes. We have still the same Nature that inspired those anonymous sculptors to give us the Gothic; we still have a sufficient number of Gothic masterpieces intact—so many epitomes of Nature, as I have said—to show what can be done by the man who starts with his vision open to her teaching.

I make no fetish of the Gothic sculpture. I do not claim for it what it does not possess. A contrast to the Greek,—a complement of it—inferior to it in some respects, superior to it in others, it is one of the most wonderful phenomena that the genius of our race has manifested. And if we are to advance in art beyond the stationary position we occupy at this moment, we shall only do so by a thorough comprehension and appreciation of the beauties and qualities that are peculiar to it.*

AUGUSTE RODIN.

* Dictated by M. Rodin to a stenographic reporter, and translated from the French by Frederick Lawton, M.A., author of the "Life and Work of Auguste Rodin." (Grant Richards, London, 1904.)